

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed concern over the fate of scores of Christians detained since Christmas in Tehran. They were informally accused of being “evangelical missionaries,” although no formal charges have been filed by authorities.

Iranian law makes proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims illegal, in contravention of international standards.

Reports indicate that as many as 70 Christians have been detained over the past two weeks. Some individuals have since been released, although it is unclear how many remain in detention. While most of those detained are Evangelical Christians, members of Iran’s Armenian Christian community also have been detained.

“What’s most troubling about this wave of detentions is the fact that Iran is continuing its recent trend of targeting Evangelical Christians, which they’ve been doing for years, and also leaders from the recognized and protected Armenian Christian community,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “USCIRF calls on Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release those Christians who have been detained and urges the U.S. government and international community to condemn these detentions and demand the detainees’ release.”

This week, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, called the detained Christians “deviant” and “corrupt” and vowed to identify and detain more in the days ahead. In a statement Tuesday, Tamaddon likened the detained Christians to the Taliban. It is unclear what Tamaddon meant by his analogy.

In its 2010 annual report, USCIRF noted that even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – protected under Iran’s constitution faced increasing discrimination and repression. While the constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities who may worship freely, members of these groups are subject to legal and other forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the

facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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